To Know

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To Know

by Basingstoke

Summary

History twitches slightly to the left. The teacup does not shatter. Will runs off with Hannibal and Abigail.

Notes

This work is finished and I will post one chapter a day. Bookmark to read later if you do not want to read it in progress.

Thanks to Luminosity and Cathexys for beta reading.

See the end of the work for more notes

Baltimore, Fall

When Hannibal touched his cheek, Will leaned in, tipping up his chin, and kissed him, or let himself be kissed, tasting blood and rainwater between their lips.

Hannibal embraced him with the cold flat of a knife against his shoulder blade. Oh, Will thought.

"I see that this nearly went differently," Will said against Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal tilted his head and drew back his hand, the knife sliding across Will's back.

"It depends on your perspective. Come." Hannibal slid the knife into his pocket and took Will's shoulder and Abigail's hand.

They passed Alana, flat and broken on the porch, as they left the house. Alana stared at them, and Will stared back, recognizing but not echoing the astonishment in her eyes. Abigail stopped to lay her jacket over Alana's face mutely.

Then they were in the Bentley, marking the upholstery with diluted blood, heading east to the docks, Will's heart hammering in his ears, his hand clasped in both of Abigail's as she leaned forward from the back seat. He looked at her, one-eared, scarred, alive. "I thought you were dead," Will said.

"You went on trial for my murder," she said, her voice squeaking.

"Breathe, child," Hannibal said, and Abigail closed her eyes and breathed deeply. "You did what I asked. You're a good girl."

"I'm a good girl," Abigail whispered. Will squeezed her hand and looked at Hannibal.

Hannibal looked back, flat and unashamed at his manipulation.

"We can be free now," Will said. "We'll go somewhere and be free."

At the dock, Hannibal drove to the end of the dock and pointed out their boat; Will started it, Abigail tight against his side, as Hannibal put the car in neutral and pushed it into the ocean.

"Where to?" Will asked.

"North," Hannibal said.

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Hannibal had a sixty-foot boat with autopilot and a 1,000 mile range. Abigail fell asleep against Will's shoulder some fifty miles offshore.

Hannibal looked at Will, the knife still in his hand. Will looked the stars slowly rising over the ink-black sea. "We can live on this boat. Go anywhere. We could circle the world ten

times over," Will said, at last.

Hannibal nodded. The moonlight caressed his moving profile and glittered in his eyes.

"But you wouldn't have taken this boat if I hadn't come. You're not a sailor."

"I had a number of options ready," Hannibal said softly.

"She was in your house all this time."

"Helping me. Learning from me. It is pleasant to speak openly of what I am. It is pleasant to form a young mind."

"Two young minds," Will said. "You had Miriam as well."

"Not the same. Miriam was my alibi. A tool. Abigail is the unknown future, and it has been most interesting to watch her develop. She is a unique individual. I might say art, except that art is static."

"You're being creepy, Chef," Abigail said. She half-opened her eyes.

"I'm always creepy," Hannibal said, standing. He kissed her forehead. "I must tend to my injuries."

"Do you need help?" Will asked.

"No. They are minor. Stay the course."

Will did stay the course, all night, as Abigail fell back into sleep on his shoulder and Hannibal returned to sit at his back.

The sun rose, slowly, and Will realized that he was sore, tired, hungry, his hair was stiff with blood and salt and he needed the bathroom badly. "This is reality," he said aloud.

"This is real," Hannibal agreed.

*

Will scrubbed sweat and terror from his skin in blissfully hot water in the en suite. He wondered if Jack was alive. He wondered if Alana was alive. He wondered if his dogs were okay, which clutched at his heart like a fist, but then he remembered the FBI was already there at his house, ready to arrest him; he would be immediately missed. They would take his dogs to safety.

Probably in their next homes they wouldn't be fed raw human. He hoped they wouldn't miss it.

He emerged in a bathrobe, raw and clean, from the stateroom straight into the delightful smells of cooking. Hannibal stopped dead when he saw Will, pan in hand.

"Good morning," Will said.

Abigail popped into the other side of the galley. "Wow," she said. "So that's your face?"

"This is my face." Will touched his chin. His face felt tender, nude even, without the beard. He'd stopped shaving when he was nineteen and trying not to be prettier than his girlfriend. He was aware of his looks; it was impossible not to be. "Do you have your sea legs?" he asked her. The boat was swaying mildly, but noticeably, on the gentle sea.

"No. But it's okay, there are rails everywhere. This is so cool! I have my own bedroom!" She disappeared from view, swaying into the cabin. Will looked at Hannibal.

"You are lovely," Hannibal said. He approached, slowly, and kissed Will's mouth.

The sound of water and smell of salt breathed in through the open deck door, mixing with the sausage and eggs and toast in the galley. Hannibal's fingertips smelled of garlic. "Thought you might like it," Will said against his lower lip. "It's a thank you for the boat."

"The boat is yours. Ours, if you will share it. We shouldn't have to touch land for weeks," Hannibal said. "We are free."

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They had breakfast on the deck, then Abigail--who had eaten only toast and a bite of sausage--said she was going to lie down and try to get used to the waves. Will found himself exhausted after his sleepless night.

He stretched out in the stateroom. It fit a king-size bed with storage on each side: clothes, but also water purification tablets, sunscreen, medication and surgical supplies, a brick of cash.

Hannibal sat on the bed beside him. Will looked up through his eyelashes. "May I look at you?" Hannibal asked.

Will nodded slightly. Hannibal pulled gently at the belt of the robe, freeing his waist, and folded one wing of cloth aside, and then the other. "I was going to cut you here," Hannibal said, tracing a line across his belly. His hand rested on Will's hip. "I am glad you chose otherwise."

"I didn't know until I knew. Then the moment came and I couldn't end...this. Whatever we have, whatever it's called, it couldn't end because of me. So here we are."

Hannibal stroked his thumb along the ridge of bone at Will's hip. "Here we are." He lowered his face to Will's stomach and inhaled. "You do not smell of fear, or of stress, or of sickness. Most especially you do not smell of that disastrous aftershave," he said, smiling up at Will.

Will closed his eyes and smiled in return. He felt Hannibal's nose trail up his midline to his chest, and then felt lips at his nipple and a stroke of tongue through the hair that surrounded it.

Hannibal settled at Will's side, arm curled around his chest, nose tucked into his neck. "I would perfume you as Alexander perfumed Hephaestion, with ambergris and myrrh and sweet oil on your hands and feet," he breathed against Will's throat. "The most precious scents of the earth and sea. I would harvest a new perfume from an asteroid, just for you, so that the aroma of heaven is spread with the beat of your heart. You are golden, Will. No more discount slop."

His heart caught in his throat. He swallowed. "You'll cover me in stardust?"

"Given the slightest chance."

"I'll keep watch," he said, curling up and stroking Hannibal's head, "for falling stars."

Hannibal kissed him, both hands on Will's bare back. His fingers were strong yet smooth--

"Chef, there's--OH MY GOD!" Abigail yelled, ending in a torrent of giggles. Hannibal and Will both sat up.

Her back was turned and her shoulders shook as she stifled her giggling. Will rolled his eyes. "Seeing my ass is the price for not knocking," he said. He tied the bathrobe back around his waist. "What's wrong?"

"The computer is beeping," Abigail said. Both hands covered her mouth and she refused to look at him.

Hannibal stood and straightened his clothes. "The navigational computer. It alerts for certain conditions. That is important. But next time, knock, or you may see more."

"For instance, we both have dicks," Will said to Abigail, sending her into a shriek of laughter. He took the back of her neck and loosely shook her, propelling her forward through the galley into the main cabin.

Hannibal checked the computer built into the chart table. "Will, there is a storm. We should sail around it, yes?"

"Probably. We're very small in the scheme of things." Will checked the storm readings, wind speed, size. "Just a rain storm, but it's best to go around. We'll swing out to sea. Follow the path of the Vikings as they fled back to Ireland."

Hannibal had a small smile on his lips. He was watching Will intently.

Abigail looked between the two of them and a blush rose back into her cheeks. "I'm going to my room," she said.

"Abigail," Will said. "Nothing will happen between Hannibal and myself while you're in the room. Not intentionally. I'm sorry you saw my butt," he said, and Abigail giggled again, with a note of hysteria in her voice.

He stepped down from the chart table and took her in his arms. She shook in his grasp.

"Things are weird right now but we'll get used to it. This will become normal," Will said.

"Right, I just, I haven't been outside in so long," Abigail said.

"Why don't you make an inventory?" Hannibal said. "Inventory our stores by cupboard. Here is a schematic. Practice your drafting, copy the schematic, and make an inventory keyed to the schematic. Twenty-four hours should be enough time."

"Yes, chef," Abigail said with a sigh. The tension flooded from her body. She took the schematic from Hannibal.

"Make note of any inefficient use of space. I did not stock this boat, so it may not have been properly done."

Abigail nodded sharply and sat down with the schematic and a gridded notebook. Hannibal smiled at her. "We have continued her schooling in a practical manner," Hannibal said to Will. "I have looked into online college courses and found them inadequate. Between the two of us, we can teach her what she needs to know."

"Psychology, emergency medicine, and fishing?"

"You say psychology as if that were not the most important aspect of education," Hannibal said. "You performed better for the teachers you liked better, did you not? And we both have extremely interesting psychological conditions."

He had a point. Will shrugged.

"I have been teaching her English literature, French, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, maths, history. You can continue her history and law. What else?"

"Insects. Biology," Will said. "Engineering. This engine in particular. We will all need to know how it works and how to fix it."

"I'm more than willing to learn from you, Will," Hannibal said in a low voice.

"Stop," Will murmured. "I'm going back to bed. If the computer alerts, knock. But we should be fine," he said to Abigail.

Hannibal kissed him all the way back to the stateroom and onto the bed. He stripped the robe off Will.

"Let me see you," Will said. He tugged at Hannibal's shirt. Hannibal took over, removing his clothes easily, draping them over a chair. His lean body was covered in scars, graying hair, bruises and small wounds.

He knelt over Will like a lion. His hair was rumpled. "See me," Hannibal said.

"I see you." His hands roamed over Hannibal's body, defining him in space.

"Feel me." Hannibal dripped oil over him, sweet oil, just as he said he would.

Will stroked his hands up Hannibal's legs. He let his fingers speak, eloquent in the grooves of Hannibal's hips and the inside of his thighs.

"Fuck me," Hannibal said. He hovered over Will on his knees.

Will pulled him down. They slipped together, apart, together again as Hannibal shifted his hips and Will held his dick in place.

He slid into Hannibal and Hannibal caught his breath. Will felt crushing pressure; Hannibal closed his eyes and the pressure eased as Hannibal took him into his body.

Hannibal leaned forward, resting his hands on Will's shoulders, and took his dick with excruciating slowness. He opened his eyes and stared down at Will. His hair half covered his eyes, half hid him, but Will couldn't look away. Eyes pierced him. Eyes always saw too much. Even half Hannibal's gaze was as sharp as the knife he hadn't been stabbed with.

He clutched at the slight softness of Hannibal's waist. His skin was like silk over braided wire cable, cushioned by a bare padding of fat and flesh. His muscles had the strength of use, exercised by swimming, lifting weights. Lifting bodies.

He was pinned to the bed by Hannibal's gaze. He could see Hannibal thinking about how to kill him, debating whether to eat him whole or just consume his brain through his eyes. He could see Hannibal tasting his eyes--and in fact, Hannibal was kissing him just below the eye. "Stop thinking," Hannibal said.

"I can't." His breath was coming faster, and not because of Hannibal's movements. His chest was tight.

"Will. Close your eyes." But Will couldn't, until Hannibal put his hand over Will's eyes, rolled him onto his side, lay on top of him to soothe him with his weight. "Listen to my heartbeat," Hannibal said.

Hannibal's heartbeat was slow even though Will's dick had just slipped out of his ass. Slow heartbeat, the lack of excitement, was one of the hallmarks of the psychopath. "How can I calm down when there's a tiger in my bed?" Will breathed.

"The tiger loves you," Hannibal said.

"You don't know what love is."

"Don't I?"

"You fed me Abigail's ear," Will said. Hannibal's heartbeat didn't shift. His hand was warm over Will's eyes.

"Out of love for her, I think. You're catching your breath."

"I know what to do with fear. I know the taste and smell and shape of it. Looking in your brain is like looking off the top of a skyscraper with no ledge holding you back. I've fallen before. Maybe I'm still falling now."

Hannibal pressed Will in his arms and legs like a snake. Will felt his breath slowing to meet Hannibal's, his heart rate lowering, though still quick as a rabbit compared to Hannibal's steadiness.

Hannibal kissed his throat. "I was going to gut you," he said. "Not kill you, but gut you. I thought you had betrayed me, and I wanted you to suffer."

"Suffer but not die," Will echoed.

"You're so interesting, Will. I want to see what you'll do next." With that, he squirmed around Will, embracing him less like a snake and more like a dog, limbs draped over him for warmth and togetherness. Like a lover, he realized, strangely late.

"I know I'm safe," Will said.

"Of course. This is your boat, Will. Your home. How could I kill you in your own home?" Hannibal kissed his cheek and they kept going north.

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Labrador, Winter

The depth of the winter was a strange time. The days were so short it was barely worth getting up. The dock was iced in, the animals were asleep. His brain felt fuzzy like it was wearing its own winter coat.

The house revolved around the fire, the kitchen, the fire again. Abigail beside him with a textbook or laptop. Hannibal kept her mind busy. Will would give her more practical lessons once the snow lifted.

The house was outfitted with an eclectic array of equipment. Will had expected the fishing and hunting gear, but the volleyball and net? The knitting needles? The scuba gear? But he couldn't wonder for long before the daylight faded and he curled up in front of the fire again.

Will was asleep, then awake, then asleep again. He felt like he could sleep until spring. He heard Abigail reciting in Italian. He stood at the sink, drank a glass of water, and looked out the window at the white hare with the headless mouse in its mouth outside the window.

The hare was standing on a snowdrift, staring in the window, frozen. Its dark eyes were like mirrors of the sky. As Will watched, its nose twitched, then it ate the mouse, nibble by nibble.

"Dad, can you bring me some water?" Abigail asked.

"Sure," Will said. He glanced away automatically, and when he looked back, the hare was gone. He filled a tall glass for Abigail and returned to the soft deerhide couch.

The couch was outrageously comfortable, piled with sheepskin and wool blankets and pillows. All he could see of Abigail was one hand and a lock of hair. He set the glass by her computer and returned to his own fleecy nest.

Outside, he heard the sound of axe on wood, only Hannibal and nothing else. Not even wind stirred the trees. He thought about the hibernating bears, the small things awake in the snow. "I liked the mouse kebabs," he said absently. Hannibal had found a nest in the house when they moved in and patiently trapped, penned, killed, skinned, and roasted the mice over the fire.

"Mm, so did I." She sounded just as dreamy. She held Will's hand in hers. "They tasted like pine, but they were meat."

"Mm-hm."

The outer door opened and Hannibal dropped a load of firewood in the foyer; then the inner door opened, with a current of sharp-smelling cold washing under the couch. Hannibal left his coat and boots in the foyer. He sat beside Will, half on top of Will, layers of fleece and flannel and wool softening his weight. The smell of his skin had permeated his clothing. "What are you doing?" he asked Abigail.

Abigail took Will's wrist out of her mouth. "Tasting Will," she said. "Wondering if I would know if it was him if we ate him."

"An interesting question," Hannibal said.

In the summer, this would have been a philosophical question. In the dreamy winter, Hannibal spread a rubber sheet over the kitchen table as Will sponged himself down with bleach and water. The fire was stoked high and roaring, filling the house with warmth and light.

Abigail held his arms as Hannibal gave him an epidural. "I'm stopping sensation mid-chest," Hannibal said. "The risk is minimal. You will recover by morning."

"Mm-hm," Will agreed. He felt a pinch and push in his spine and then his body turned to lead, or maybe clay, something moldable and heavy. His eyes hung half-closed.

Hannibal turned him onto his back and bathed his torso in iodine. He and Abigail were already in scrubs and masks.

Will could see but not feel Hannibal running a gloved hand down his midline. "Do you mind a decorative scar, Will?" he asked.

"The opposite of mind," Will said.

Hannibal cut into him. Will felt it as a cold slice, like a papercut without pain. "Do you recognize this character, Abigail?" Hannibal asked.

"Is it a rune?"

"No. This is Het, the fifth letter of the Punic alphabet. This alphabet later influenced Hebrew and Greek and from there, modern Cyrillic. The characters are written from right to left. This, an ancient character, is highly angular, thus easy to carve. Why is that?"

"It would have been written with a stylus on clay," Abigail said.

"Good. Now name the visible layers."

"Epidermis. Dermis. Hypodermis."

"Hypodermis is used for?"

"Um, fat storage."

"Which we see. I'm glad you have a good layer of fat, Will. It means I am feeding you well. We will need it to get through this cold winter." Hannibal leaned over and smiled with his eyes above the mask. "Now, Abigail, where is the liver?"

"Upper right of the abdomen."

"Thus the placement of the incision. I do not want to damage his ribs, as that will take too long to heal. We go under the ribs. Do you see?"

"Wow," Abigail breathed. Her eyes were enormous.

"Lovely white bone," Hannibal purred. Will felt a slight pressure in his chest. "I admit I am stroking your ribs, Will. The curve is truly beautiful."

"Thank you," Will said. He felt pulling and tugging in his heavy clay body.

"As we do not wish to cause permanent damage, we take care with the structures of the body. With game of course it is different, but you know that. The liver is covered in--do you recall?" Something prodded him, queasily deep.

"A serous coat," Abigail answered.

"I was looking for Glissom's capsule, but that will do. What are the structures to be concerned with?" Will was losing the ability to distinguish touch. He felt it like nausea, or arousal, something deep within him and vaguely defined.

"The hepatic artery and vein--no, the portal vein. And the ligaments."

"The falciform ligaments. The ligamentum venosum. The ligamentum teres. Now, why are we harvesting his liver?"

"It regenerates. The only organ to regenerate."

"Correct. Not true regeneration, though. It will not regrow into the same shape. It will only regrow into the same function. So we will only take a slice...like so. Wrap that for me, Abigail, and then we will repair."

Will felt the closing of the wound as warmth. Hannibal was clothing him with skin, stitch by stitch; he was knitting muscle onto his naked bone. He smiled, softly, as he was comfortable again.

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The pain, when he woke up, was deep and unsettling, but it eased when he looked at the lovely incision on his stomach. "The letter Het," he said. It looked like a ladder.

"You were listening," Hannibal said. The incision was large and deep; it extended all the way to his liver, of course. Hannibal spread antibacterial cream and bandaged it back up. "Punic had no vowels, only consonants. Hannibal is spelled Het-Nun-Bet-Eyn-Lemda."

"And you'd like to spell that out on my body."

"Desperately." He kissed Will. "Shall we eat?"

"I'm starving," Will said.

Hannibal cooked him plainly: fried in butter with garlic, served over mashed potatoes, with a side of slow-cooked mustard greens and foraged burdock. There was barely a bite of liver for each of them. Hannibal had been conservative.

Will chewed himself slowly. So did Abigail, looking at him, rolling him over in her mouth.

"I think I would know you," she said.

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He healed slowly. But that was fine. There was nothing to do but look at the fire, learn to knit from YouTube, and sleep.

He enjoyed knitting. Making something out of nothing. He demonstrated the process of cocooning to Abigail, knitting a caterpillar, then wrapping yarn around it, then unraveling the caterpillar inside to make a broad-winged, fleecy moth.

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Labrador, Spring

When winter finally broke, Will worked on the truck with Abigail until it started and ran. "Hear that? Like a kitten purring."

"Sounds like leaving the house," Abigail said, grinning.

They let the truck run to warm up and went inside to fetch Hannibal. He was standing with the shopping list in his hand and his pen pressed to his lip. "Ready?" Will asked.

"Always. But if they do not have real vanilla extract, we may have to move," Hannibal said.

Will kissed his ridiculous face. "Come on, I'll drive."

They'd been snowed in all winter. They hadn't seen other people since they left Baltimore six months ago. The house was stocked well, but it was stocked with canned and frozen food and they were all aching for something fresh.

And it was spring, for real and true. The road was thawing, snow had finished collapsing off the ridge, their new identities were internalized, and they could brave the town.

Hannibal looked at the path to town and his face became serious. "I will drive," he said.

"You, city boy?"

"I was not always a city boy. I learned to drive in a terrain and weather much like this. I should say, what makes you think you can drive, child of the South?" Hannibal swung into the driver's seat. Will gave Abigail a hand into the rear of the cab before climbing into the passenger seat.

"Show me what you've got, then," Will said.

"Do you ever stop flirting?" Abigail complained.

"Not yet," Will said. He put his hand on Hannibal's thigh and laughed when Abigail made a gagging noise.

Hannibal brushed his hair out of his eyes. They were all untidy, but Hannibal was unrecognizable, his long fringe bleached blond by lemon juice and winter sun. He'd chopped firewood for months without a hat for just this effect.

The truck struggled up the path, scaring birds from the trees and hares from the bushes. They paused at the top of the ridge. "Do you have it?" Will asked.

"Yes," Hannibal said.

"Then go," Will said.

Hannibal inched the truck over the top of the ridge and began the controlled slide down the ridge. Will took his hand off Hannibal's thigh and reached behind him for Abigail. She took his hand with both of hers. "All in, live or die," she said.

One side of the path was mountain. The other side was valley. The path was made of icy mud. Dying was an option.

But they didn't die. Hannibal looked at Will smugly as the crossed the bridge over the stream at the base of the ridge. "I'll blow you once we get home," Will said.

Abigail made a strangled noise and he laughed. "You're going to scar me for life," she said.

"It's important to model adult sexual behavior," Will told her brightly.

Once they got over the ridge, the town was only five miles. Walking distance, in fact, if not for the ridge and the forest and the deep, rocky stream.

"Where did I adopt you?" Will asked.

"Wisconsin," Abigail recited.

"Where am I from?"

"All over, but mostly Texas."

"Where's Doc from?"

"Doc is from Norway and he studies little auks."

"Alkekungen," Hannibal said in a disturbingly jovial Norwegian accent. He grinned at the two of them. Will smiled helplessly back.

They passed a vehicle stopped at a mailbox on the road, and Hannibal waved. "Our neighbors!" he said cheerfully.

"You like playing pretend a little too much," Will said.

"Don't be such a gloomy Gus," Hannibal said.

The town was very small, really just a crossroad, but it had a post office and a bar and, most importantly, a general store. Hannibal parked in front of the store and slid down from the cab. "I smell fresh bread," Hannibal said, and strode inside.

"Magazines," Abigail said. She slipped out Hannibal's side of the truck.

"Really? Magazines?" Will said, slipping down the other side.

"I want to see what's in for spring!" Abigail followed Hannibal. Will followed Abigail.

Inside the small store, Hannibal was standing in what was apparently the bakery section--a surprisingly large selection of breads, bagels, and pies--with a freshly torn rye loaf held to his

nose. He was inhaling and exhaling with a blissful smile.

"Hi," Will said to the woman behind the counter. "Sorry about him. We've been snowed in."

"Oh, don't worry about a thing. You're the ones moved into the sea house?" she asked. Will nodded. "We saw your chimney smoke! Couldn't reach you to say hi. I'm Marie," she said, extending a hand over the counter.

Will shook her hand. "Gilbert Jones. This is--my daughter Anne is around here somewhere, and this is Christian Larsen--"

"Christian," Hannibal said, correcting his pronunciation.

"Chris-jan."

"Chris-tian," Hannibal said, enunciating.

"This is my boyfriend Doc," Will said. Hannibal grinned at them both.

Marie offered her hand to Hannibal. "Norska eller svenska?" she asked.

"Norska!"

"Svenska," she said. "At least my mom is."

Hannibal said something in what Will assumed was Swedish. Marie replied haltingly. "No, your accent isn't bad!" Hannibal said. "More practice! Did you bake this bread? It is fresh!"

"No, Ray bakes the bread. You came in at just the right time. He only comes through once a month or so, on the dogsled, and then whatever I don't sell right away goes in the freezer. You're a doctor?"

"Doctor of birds, not of people! Important distinction! I study alkekung."

"Alkekung? What's that?"

"Little auk," Hannibal said.

"Oh! You're in the right place for that."

"Yes! Just the right place. Until we were snowed in so badly, we could not see the sky! I had to dig out the windows twice," Hannibal said brightly. He sounded like he couldn't be happier.

"Better move to town. The sea house is forever being cut off. The road used to be better, but then the stream changed path," Marie said.

"The birds are on the sea," Hannibal said. "But we will buy all the bread. Everything. Ah, bread, I missed you," he cooed to the loaf in his hands.

"Ran out of flour six weeks ago," Will said. "We thought we could reach the town by boat, but…"

"Mm, not with the barnacle rocks. You healthy?"

"Oh, sure. No shortage of vitamins and brown rice, just no flour," Will said. "Annie!"

"What?" Abigail yelled back.

"Come meet our neighbor!"

Abigail ducked out from the hair care section, judging from the bottles in her arms. "Hi," she said.

"Hello there, young lady!" Marie said.

"Oh my god, is that fresh bread? Dad, please tell me we're getting bread." She leaned on Hannibal's shoulder and sniffed the bread. "Mmmmmmmm. I don't even want to eat it, I just want to smell it."

"I will eat it," Hannibal said. As proof, he took an enormous bite. Abigail made a small noise and grabbed the other half of the loaf from him. Hannibal held on, and they struggled for a moment, before Abigail started gnawing on the crust straight from his hand. They stared each other down, nose to nose, furiously chewing.

"I promise we have money and we're not normally like this," Will said. He pulled the shopping list from Hannibal's pocket. "We need as much of this list as you can provide. And we need to remember that we are humans and not seagulls," he said, raising his voice slightly.

Hannibal and Abigail both looked at him. Hannibal offered him the bread. "Fuck. That does smell good," he muttered, and he took a bite from Hannibal's fingers.

Marie looked over the list. "I can do a lot of this and order in the rest. If you buy out the pastry case, people will understand. We've all been snowed in one time or another."

"God is good," Hannibal said.

"This'll be about an hour if you need anything else in town."

"We should get the mail forwarded and stretch our legs. Anne...seriously? We have plenty of shampoo," Will said, looking at the hair stuff still clutched in her arms.

"We don't have the right shampoo for my hair texture," she said, hugging the bottles to her chest.

Hannibal shooed him away. "You get for us the mail. I will discuss with Annie the product."

"Okay," Will said. "Okay, have fun."

It should have been a relief to leave the scrutiny of the store and its clerk, but he felt lost without Hannibal and Abigail; he felt alone, adrift. He couldn't smell them.

He stopped, on the slushy sidewalk, and looked at the sky, and inhaled the cold, clean air. He was Will Graham. He was on the Labrador coast. It was 11:18 AM. He was alive.

"Hiya!" a woman said and Will jumped. "Sorry! I'm Constable Jenny. Jennifer Ball, RCMP. New in town?"

"Ah. Yes. Kind of. We're in the sea house," Will said, his heart hammering. "Sorry. Snowed in for six months, not used to...strangers." He shook her hand.

"I thought someone moved in up there. You ok? Got an emergency radio?"

"Fine, no problems. Yes, we do."

"We like to check in but nobody could reach you. We were actually about to go over the ridge and say hello, but here you are. Sarge!"

A white-haired man emerged from a utility vehicle and shook hands with Will, introducing himself, inquiring about the household. Will explained again about his daughter and his boyfriend and the auks, that they were healthy, that everything was all right apart from the carb situation.

"What excellent timing. Ray just delivered the bread," Sarge said.

"Yeah, my boyfriend found it, I can't pry him away."

"Well, we'll cross off that visit and continue on our rounds. Constable, did you give him the emergency information?"

"Not yet. Radio, phone, Skype, it's all in here," Constable Jenny said, giving him a trifold paper. "Schedules and pictures so you know who we are. The station is about fifty kilometers thataway but we pass through a lot. Here's a map." The town and the sea house were marked with little dots. A flag marked the station and a star marked the town with the only real doctor in the area.

"We see occasional property theft and a great deal of domestic violence. Out of an abundance of caution, I will give contact information separately to your boyfriend and daughter as well," Sarge said. He tipped his hat.

"That's fine," Will said. "We made it through six months with...nothing criminal. A lot of food-based arguments. I'm--very grateful for the bread."

Sarge crossed to the store and Will continued on to the post office, where he met Bruce the postmaster and explained about the house and his boyfriend and his daughter and the auks, and on the way out he met Maura, the mail carrier, and she said hello and asked where he lived and he explained about the house and his boyfriend and his daughter and the auks; then two more people came in to check their mail, and they said hello, and it would be rude to just

leave, so he explained about his house and boyfriend and daughter and auks and they gave him a lot of recipes for brown rice.

A lot of recipes. He made the mistake of saying that he didn't really cook, so that led to a conversation about the theory of carbs and acids and oils and protein and some very simple recipes he really should try before he could explain that he *could* cook but Hannibal always beat him to the kitchen.

By the time he escaped the post office his head was buzzing with words words words. He glanced at the store; Hannibal and Abigail weren't in the truck. He ducked into the bar, praying for dark and silence.

He was mistaken. It was very small and very bright, a restaurant more than a bar, with huge picture windows looking over the sea. Fuck. He was about to turn and hide in the truck, maybe lay in the cargo bed, but he heard Hannibal call out "Darling!"

He exhaled and waited with averted eyes as Hannibal found him. "My dear," Hannibal said softly. He took Will in his arms. "Listen to my heart," he murmured. He squeezed him tightly, making a dark calm place for him, pressing his slow pulse into Will's ringing ears.

Will gradually matched his breath. "Better?" Hannibal whispered. Will nodded.

He realized that Hannibal had gotten up from a table with Abigail and a stranger. Will sat in the empty seat. Hannibal held his hand under the table, firmly.

"Too many people?" Abigail said. Will nodded. He let his glasses slip halfway down his nose, enough to halve his vision, and managed to look up at the strange man.

"This is Ray, the baker! He is also American. He suggested we eat here before we return home."

Will shook hands across the table and thanked God he didn't have to explain about the house and the boyfriend and the daughter and the auks. "Good to meet more queers," Ray said, and Will blinked at the word. "Me and the Sergeant. You ran into him earlier."

"Oh. Yes."

"Do I count as queer if I'm straight but I'm being raised in a super-gay house?" Abigail asked.

"Annie," Will said.

She ignored his hint. "Doc plays opera allllll the time, that's super-gay," she said.

"Is it?" Hannibal asked.

"Nah," Ray said. "Pretty much the only thing that's gay is touching dicks." He smirked slightly as Abigail turned red. "There's a few queers around. Donna up the coast, she's the funeral director for the area. Mo and Eric on the lake."

"Enough for a Pride parade," Will said.

"Yeah, come June, we'll make some noise," Ray said.

"Hi there! You're new in town," the sprightly young waitress said. "Hi, Ray!"

"Hi, Diana," Ray said. "What's on today?"

"Venison ossobuco with garlic turnip mash. It's really good."

"Ossobuco?" Hannibal said.

"It's slow-cooked deer shank in a white wine sauce with bay leaf and gremolata."

"*Ossobuco en bianco*?" Hannibal said, managing Italian pronunciation and a Norwegian accent at the same time. "Yes, indeed!"

"For all four? We have sandwiches too, and we can do pasta, but Pop only makes one big dish a day."

"Certainly for us! You will love it," Hannibal told Abigail.

"You know I'll eat anything Pop cooks," Ray told her. "And something for the dogs. I staked them out in the meadow."

"Sure, Ray. Pop knew you were coming today so he saved them the guts and head."

"Hey, that's good eating," Ray said.

"They're good dogs," Diana said with a grin. "Anything to drink?"

"I want a beer," Abigail said.

Will rested his chin on his hand. "Do you now?"

"I'm nineteen. I can."

"She'll have a beer and I'll drink it," Will said to Diana. "She's my daughter, I can confirm she's nineteen. Something light, a pilsner or wheat ale, to go with the venison."

"Pop brews his own," Diana said. "I'll bring out a glass. Or a pitcher, for the table?"

"I must drive back up the ridge. Only a taste," Hannibal said.

"They're small pitchers. Go ahead," Ray said. "If I get drunk then Trudeau will drive me home."
Diana laughed and tucked her blank pad back in her apron.

"Trudeau's a dog. The thing about driving a dogsled is the dogs know where home is. Just gotta make sure you don't fall off," Ray said.

"Can you still sled in the spring? I've never seen one," Will said.

"I'll have to hang it up soon, too bad. The dogs love it. In summer I deliver by four-wheeler and Trudeau patrols with Sarge instead."

Diana returned with a small pitcher and four glasses. She set it on the table, then pulled up a chair next to Abigail. "So hi! I'm Diana, Pop is my great-uncle, but everyone calls him Pop because our last name is Detti."

Abigail frowned and Diana laughed. "Detti sounds like Daddy! But Mr. Bowley said he wasn't going to call anyone Daddy. This was in 1979, I think? But Pop was a little bit older than Mr. Bowley, even though Mr. Bowley left him the bar in 91 when he died from that heart attack, so he said to call him Papa and everyone said okay. So now it's Pop. And I'm Diana," Diana said, holding out her hand for Abigail to shake.

"Anne Olesen," Abigail said. "Dad adopted me when I was eighteen so I didn't take his name."

"Oh! I didn't know you could do that," Diana said.

"You don't stop needing a dad when you turn eighteen. God knows I didn't," Will said softly. He poured the beer for the table, full glasses for himself and Ray, tasters for Abigail and Hannibal. "Diana? You didn't bring a glass for yourself."

"Oh, no, I just wanted to say hi. There's only two other girls our age around here."

"We live in the sea house and I guess that gets cut off a lot so I won't be in town very much," Abigail said.

"Well, if you ever get stuck in town, you can come stay with me and Pop. I mean, you can stay with anyone, but come see me and Pop. I bet you can get a four-wheeler for cheap. A lot of people have them. Only way to get over that ridge."

Abigail turned big eyes on Will. "I'll think about it," Will said. He handed her the taster. She continued to give him big eyes. "I'll think about it, and you can get information on cheap four-wheelers, and you can try that beer, but only because you were stuck in the house with us for six months without complaining too much."

Hannibal laughed and kissed Will's cheek. Abigail and Diana traded emails. "It was minimal complaining," Will said to Hannibal.

"I agree. She is a good girl," Hannibal said.

Abigail tried the beer and made a truly incredible face. Hannibal poured her glass into his own, laughing louder.

*

Ray extracted a promise from Will and Hannibal to watch the Stanley Cup with him, and then insisted on following them to the ridge in his sled, in case of disaster. At the top of the ridge, Hannibal got out and waved.

They slid down the trail and they were back home. Will felt it in his guts, in his teeth, in his soul. "An excellent sortie," Hannibal said.

They got out of the car and Will took Hannibal's hand. Abigail ran past them, into the house, clutching her notebook full of Instagram and Snapchat handles. "You're definitely buying me a quad!" she yelled as she pulled open the door.

Will rested his head on Hannibal's shoulder. "People," he said.

"You did very well."

"Did we make friends? I think we made a lot of friends."

"I think we did."

"Fuck," Will said. "I didn't manage that as my actual self."

"Give me a mask and I'll tell you the truth," Hannibal said.

*

Labrador, Summer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Summer was alive in the North. Deer, mice, hares all bounded through the forest, looking for food and fun and sunlight. Fish and seals and birds squabbled at the coast. The little auks had hatched and fledged and grown into little adults inside the vast colony; Hannibal was amusing himself by taking genuine scientific observations of the birds. He hiked along the coast nearly daily with his binoculars and notebooks.

Abigail, strong and active as the rest of the forest, wore a T-shirt and shorts with her waterproof duck boots. The weather wasn't really warm enough. "Put on a sweater," Will said.

"No. I need sun. I need vitamin D."

"Mosquitos," Will said. He looped his knitting over his fingers and offered her a windbreaker, but she refused.

"I'm wearing Skin So Soft and I am going to get some sun," Abigail said.

Hannibal looked her over with an appraising eye. "How lovely you are. Healthy and strong."

"Thank you," she said.

"I will take some blood tonight, if that does not interfere with your plans."

"It doesn't. Black pudding?" Abigail asked.

Hannibal looked wounded. "Not in summer, my darling!"

Hannibal traipsed among the rocks at the coast. Will motored out a little way with Abigail, then sat on the deck and knitted while she fished. He corrected her form gently. When the clouds finally closed over the sun and she shivered, he tied off the scarf he'd been making and looped it around her neck.

"Don't say it," Abigail said. Will just kissed her hair.

"What do you think, salt or smoke?" he asked. He piloted them back to the house.

"Salt. The goose is still in the smoker. Fishy goose," she said, making a face.

"The goose is likely to be fishy anyway, it's local. Everything gets a little fishy on the sea. I bet you'll taste fishy."

"Will not," Abigail said. She carried her catch into the house while Will tied up. Then, she gave her arm to Hannibal while Will cleaned the fish and packed most of them in salt for

winter.

Hannibal cooked alkekung for dinner. "Losers in the great war for life," he said. "This one is young, and tried to eat a crab with too sharp a snap. His leg was broken. This one was killed by a gull, who ate the belly but left the rest. This one was simply too slow," he said, stroking the head of the last and smirking. He peeled the skins off them all and broiled them with one of Abigail's fresh-caught fish.

After the first course, he served palate-cleansing bitter greens and light white wine, and then came the crowning glory: a mousse of Abigail's blood with milk chocolate and orange. "It's delicious," Will said.

Hannibal examined his face. "But?"

"The individual notes of the blood disappear." He could taste the slight metallic sweetness, but he couldn't taste any other flavors that he knew should be there: bright youth and health, gamy hunter, salty sea-dweller. It was drowned out by the bold orange and bitter chocolate.

Hannibal slid his spoon over his tongue, his eyes distant, entirely focused on taste. "You are correct," he said. "My dears, I am so sorry."

"It's a different concept, cooking for the taste of the ingredient rather than the taste of the dish," Abigail said.

"We should have emulated the natives of this region and drunk the blood fresh. How unspeakable to waste you," he said, extending his hand to Abigail.

She took his hand and pressed it to her cheek. "You didn't waste me. This is delicious."

"Still. I will be the next meal, and you may waste me if you will. I will even consent to be gumbo," Hannibal said, looking at Will.

"Hannibal. Gumbo is made with shrimp and okra. Where am I going to get shrimp and okra around here?"

*

He found himself looking at Hannibal differently when he was trying to decide how to butcher him. What muscles propelled him as he moved about the kitchen, as he chopped wood, as he rode Will.

Will ran his hands over Hannibal's body, feeling what muscles were engorged with exertion. "Not the legs," he said, kissing Hannibal just inside the knee. "Not your beautiful back and certainly not this ass." He kissed Hannibal in the small of the back.

"No, indeed," Hannibal agreed.

He settled over Hannibal and sighed, relaxing into the curve of his body. They were the same size, more or less. They fit together. He slid his hand under Hannibal's chest and toyed with his nipple. "Arm or chest?"

"The ribs below the heart, where Jesus was pierced with the spear as an act of mercy. That is where I would be pierced by you."

"You're not very christly," Will said. "I'm not sure the metaphor holds up, even if we are eating your flesh and blood."

Hannibal turned his head and looked into his eyes. "The Antichrist, of course. The same actions for the opposite ends."

*

Abigail washed Hannibal's chest with iodine. "I'm going to get good at this," she said.

"That is one of my aims," Hannibal said. He wasn't numbed or sedated. They weren't going as deep into Hannibal as Hannibal had gone into Will.

"Stop me if I start to gut him like a deer," Will said to Abigail. She laughed. "I'm serious," Will said. "I'm pretty sure I'll stay present, but...I might not."

"I will stop you," Hannibal said. Even supine on the kitchen table with his arms curled over his head, Will believed him.

Will counted down the ribs from Hannibal's heart. He thought of Byzantine icons, flat medieval devotional art, and he slid his knife into Hannibal's flesh.

He cut a narrow V of skin, then peeled the flap of skin away. Hannibal inhaled, carefully. Blood welled up along the broad wound and Abigail blotted it away with sterile gauze.

Will took up the scalpel and, mindful of nerve and blood vessel, cut a slender wedge of muscle and fat from Hannibal's side. He lifted the cutlet into a metal dish.

"There. Abigail, please close," Will said.

"Got it," Abigail said.

Will moved to the kitchen to prep the meat, but Hannibal reached a lazy arm out and stopped him. Hannibal's pupils were enormous. Will lowered his mask, leaned down, and kissed him. Hannibal knotted his hand into his hair, holding him in place, breathing heavily against his cheek. When he let Will go, his teeth were bared and Will could see murder in his eyes.

Not of Will, though. Not the desire to kill him in particular. Just the primal instinct to stab, slash, and butcher.

He had to remember that Hannibal was patient but not peaceful by nature. Hannibal could wait for a kill, but never stop, and there was only so much that bird hunting and volunteer cannibalism could do.

He set down the meat and gathered Hannibal's head to his chest so he could see Abigail's work. "See how careful her stitches are?"

"Yes," Hannibal murmured. "Very fine. Well done." Hannibal clamped Will's hands to him, breathing steadily. Patience, not peace.

"I'm not hurting you?" Abigail said.

"Of course you are hurting me. But you are most welcome, my dear girl." Hannibal relaxed, finally, and breathed in rhythm with Abigail's slow, even stitches.

"It's me next, isn't it? No more bikinis." Abigail continued her small, slow stitches without distress.

"Abigail. I would never take anything from you that you do not give willingly, not unless there is no other option. If you do not want this mark, then you shall not have it."

Abigail paused. "I'll think about it," she said.

*

Will cooked the harvested meat in Irish butter and salt and nothing else. He served the meat with fluffy buttermilk biscuits and maple syrup. "Canadian style," he said.

There was a lot of flavor in Hannibal's meat. He'd eaten good food, drunk good wine, had a lot of fun.

Hannibal tasted the meal and turned shining eyes on Will; he was delighted, nearly giddy. "You use heavy spices to boost the flavor of bland meat or disguise bad quality. Simplicity highlights quality," Will said.

"No offense, but I think you taste better than Will," Abigail said.

"I disagree," Hannibal said. "This is muscle, a far easier flavor than liver. We must taste your muscle, dear Will."

"Wait for winter," Will said.

*

That was summer: fishing, birding, cooking. Abigail and Hannibal went frequently to town. Will tended to stay home and put up fish and fruit for winter, or knit on the dock, or make lures for the brook trout. Ray dropped by whenever he was in the area delivering bread and would quietly help with whatever he was doing; he was good company and he often brought a dog.

It was a great life. Will wondered how long it would last.

He stretched, naked, across the bed before curling up under the sheet. The sky was still navy blue over the trees, the stars not yet out. The days were shortening. Hannibal's harvest wound had healed into a clean red V along his ribs.

Hannibal closed the curtains tight and looked grim. "What's wrong?" Will said.

"Ray and the Sergeant suspect us."

Will sat up. "How do you know?"

"Their looks. I don't know yet if they think that I am what I am, or if they think I am abusing you. You recall that is the Sergeant's particular area of concern. They are worried about you and Abigail, though, and they are watching me. I will have to kill them both and make it look like an accident."

"Oh," Will said.

"They drive different vehicles so it will have to be the house. I will find out if they have a furnace, that would be easiest." He cast his eyes over Will. "You are upset."

"I like Ray. So do you."

"I like myself more," Hannibal said. He stripped off his clothes and slipped into bed beside Will. He leaned over and kissed him. "You see the necessity," he said.

"I do. I'm just...regretful."

"People pass like ships on the ocean. We enjoy them for a time and remember them fondly once they are gone. This is life. I can spare Constable Jenny and Constable Marcel, at least."

Will sighed. He drew Hannibal down on top of him. They kissed leisurely, luxuriously. Their evening-bristled chins rasped together.

The last blue glow of the sun faded, leaving only the slight, misty starlight to outline their bodies. Hannibal knelt up over Will and took a tiny hinged box set with a enamel lion from the table by the bed. "My Hephaestion," Hannibal murmured, and he stroked perfumed beeswax on Will's throat, his hands, his feet, his groin. He rubbed his cheek on Will's thighs luxuriously and stroked Will erect with sweet oil.

"What are you conquering next, Alexander?" Will breathed.

"Everything I see." With that, Hannibal sank down and engulfed him. He pressed his nose to Will's skin. He opened his mouth to chase Will's sweat with tongue and teeth. He tasted the scarred initial in Will's skin.

Will pressed his head into the pillow, shoulders into the mattress, and swelled his hips up into Hannibal's body. Hannibal bit his nipple hard and Will gasped and came.

He cupped his hands under Hannibal's thighs and touched his mouth to the tender crease inside his thigh and the seam of his testicles. He smelled skin and and pine and heat, wool and beeswax, seawater.

Hannibal thrust into his mouth and came on his tongue, briny as the ocean, sharp and herbal. He sighed, content, and curled around Will under the sheet He was almost too warm. "I will take care of everything," he murmured in Will's ear. "It is necessary to maintain this life we share."

"I know," Will said.

*

Hannibal sailed the yacht up the coast to spy on the Sergeant's house. They had a kayak, now, to use for ship to shore; they had binoculars, directional microphones, so many useful things.

Abigail had a date with Constable Marcel, a young man near her own age. He found Abigail's school French charming; she found his dark eyes dreamy. He had invited her to play MarioKart with some friends on his day off. She took her four-wheeler.

Will went coyote hunting with Ray. "It's been attacking dogs," Ray said. "Normally a coyote will try to get busy with a dog, not take it out."

Ray was the woodsman. Will was a fisherman. Here, he was an extra set of eyes, extra hands, another voice.

"Maybe this one doesn't recognize dogs as kin," Will said.

But they were mostly silent. Ray followed the coyote's tracks with magnified eyes in a sun-weathered face. His glasses had a strap in the back for security and a filter he could snap on for snow.

Ray raised a finger to his lip and pointed. Will saw the coyote immediately: long legs, ratty coat, naked tail. There was something very wrong with the animal. "Mange?" he murmured.

Ray raised one shoulder: maybe. "Mange, fleas, cancer." He raised a scope and examined the coyote.

It looked so much like a dog. Will wanted to take it home and give it a flea bath and a course of antibiotics, get it healthy--but it wasn't a dog. It was wild and it would never be tamed. It was sick, so it was best to give it peace.

Ray raised his rifle to his shoulder. He inhaled, held his breath, and exhaled as he fired. The coyote fell with the first shot.

"Be ready to finish," Ray said, and they closed in with their rifles. No need, though. The coyote was dead.

Ray unfolded a tarp from his pack. "Help me wrap her up?"

Will helped wrap her up. He stroked her head and looked at her pale gums. "Mange and fleas both, I think," he told Ray. He jerked his hand back as the black insides of her ears moved. "Definite fleas."

"Yeah. They're always just sick, critters. Not like people."

They sealed the tarp and carried it back to the four-wheeler. "Everything okay at home?" Ray asked, carefully not looking at him.

"I'm fine," Will said.

"You seem tense."

"I'm always tense." He touched his forehead and closed his eyes. "This is me relaxed. I've always been this way. It was worse when I had to interact with strangers every day."

"Okay," Ray said. "I believe you. And if your answer changes, I'll believe you then too."

Will nodded. "I'm more fine here than I have been in a long time. A really long time," he said.

"The land hits some people that way."

They took the diseased coyote to Animal Control and Will went home.

Abigail returned flushed and happy before sundown. Will kissed her forehead and didn't tease her about Marcel. Hannibal returned as the moon rose above the ocean. "They have a furnace," he told Will.

*

He took Abigail out in the boat the following morning. He tried to, anyway. Hannibal stopped him in the foyer. "Will."

"Hannibal?"

"Never lie to me," Hannibal said.

"I haven't." He hadn't even thought the thought. It wasn't a lie if you didn't even think it.

"Your body, right now, betrays you. You are leaving me," Hannibal said, and he pinned Will to the wall and choked him until he blacked out. Abigail's screams rang in his ears.

*

He woke up shackled to the kitchen table. "Ten minutes," Hannibal said to Abigail.

Abigail was writing and sobbing. Will looked around as far as he could. He was shackled ankle and wrist, face down on the table. Why did Hannibal even have shackles, he thought, absurdly. Did he order them to stock the boat along with his surgical supplies?

"Nine minutes," Hannibal said. Had it been a minute?

"Don't hurt her," Will said.

"I will not." He stooped and kissed Will's cheek. "Eight minutes, Abigail."

Tears streamed down Abigail's face as her pen scribbled across the page.

"Six minutes."

He was sure two minutes hadn't gone by. He thought he was sure. Time was strange and bent. His feet were bare in the shackles. He pressed his hands flat against the wood.

"You may struggle, Will. It is inevitable. Three minutes."

"I'm done! I'm done!" she cried.

"Well done! Present your essay."

She leaped up, tried to hand it to him, but he held up his hand. "Abigail. Present the essay."

She sobbed, once, hard, and began to read. "The bastinado--"

Hannibal struck the bottom of Will's feet. Blood roared in his ears. The pain was sharp, then numb and white as he continued to strike, then red and engulfing as he continued to strike, then loud as he still continued, screaming through his blood and his bones and his flesh like a hurricane, going on and on and on.

*

The pain throbbed from the soles of his feet to his forehead and back. He tried not to move.

Abigail bent over his feet, holding cool cloths to his raw flesh. Her eyes were swollen but the tears had stopped.

"I hadn't even decided," Will whispered.

"He can see our thoughts," Abigail said. Will couldn't muster a counterargument.

Hannibal entered the room with cool drinks. "I am sorry the lesson needed to be so harsh," he said. He put the straw to Will's lips.

Will swallowed. He tasted lemon, green tea, mint. "Thank you," he said.

*

It took weeks to heal. He had deep bone bruises that turned his feet cartoonish, purple and swollen like balloons. Hannibal carried him from the bed to the couch in the morning, to the bath when needed, out to the dock to get a bit of air, back to bed at night. He wrapped Will's feet in soothing poultices. He thought that Hannibal enjoyed his helplessness--his need for care, the way he stayed where he was put--and Hannibal smiled before Will said a word.

In turn, Will realized, Hannibal couldn't go hunting while Will needed him so much. Nobody would die until he healed.

One late morning, Abigail out on her four-wheeler, Hannibal close by in the kitchen, they heard a truck hesitating on the ridge and slaloming down the newly snowy path. Hannibal opened the door to watch the progress of the vehicle. "Hallo!" he called out.

"Jesus, that's a death trap!" Ray shouted. "Hi."

"Yes, soon we will be snowed in once more! Such is the joy of the land!" Hannibal said.

Ray stomped into the house. "You're laid up?" he said to Will, looking at his bandaged feet.

"Caught my socks on fire. I'll be okay," Will said.

"Socks on fire?"

"We don't put out the fire, we just bank it, and we got a gust of wind down the chimney, I guess. It scattered the embers. I was the first up."

"Ow," Ray said. "You need a dog. I brought you a fish pie and a baguette and you can have one from Ezzie's litter if you want. Short legs. No good for the sled."

"A fish pie! A delight! And a dog, I don't know, we aren't staying long," Hannibal said. "My grant is two years only. This is I think one year exactly."

"It is," Will said. "A year this month. I would absolutely love one of Ezzie's pups but it's true, we just don't know where we're going after this." He'd abandoned enough dogs. His heart couldn't take it.

"So a university owns the house?" Ray said.

Will turned up his hands and looked at Hannibal. Hannibal shrugged his shoulders. "Yuliya arranged the rental."

"Huh. I was trying to work out the owner. It's so hard to get to, it seems like a hazard to let people rent it," Ray said.

"But the birds! My little auks, they gather here! Look at their nests on the rock," Hannibal said.

Ray looked at Will. Will smiled. "Thank you for thinking of us," Will said.

"Blackhawks, October 5th. First round is on me. Be there or...I'll be bored."

"Wouldn't miss it," Will said.

Ray left. They heard his vehicle struggle up the road. Hannibal leaned over the fish pie and inhaled. "I will miss his baking," Hannibal said.

Chapter End Notes

I will note here that I didn't intend to bite emungere's Ladders series, but noticed certain similarities as I reread it after I started writing this. What can I do but point you to the OG: https://archiveofourown.org/series/88470

ilu emungere you are amazing and inspiring.

Labrador, Fall

Hannibal took Abigail's boyfriend's rifle away from him and let his body fall to the floor.

"Is he--" she gasped.

"Still alive," Hannibal said. "Marcel is a good, polite boy and killing him would solve nothing."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know he suspected us."

"They have suspected us for a long time. This is my fault, not taking care of it before the suspicion spread."

"What are we going to do?" Abigail said.

Will had his ear to the door. He ignored the pain in his feet; he could walk, it was just uncomfortable. "Leave through the back. There's a truck coming down the road. Get to the boat."

They slipped out steadily and silently, invisible in the trees on the moonless night. The pine trees were carved into a soft arch over the path to the dock.

Constable Jenny and the Sergeant were knocking on the front door. They hadn't seen them. The family would push out the boat and be gone like ghosts.

Will stepped from the dock to the boat. The wood creaked, a hare bolted from under the dock, and Will froze.

Someone turned on a flashlight and cocked a pistol beneath it. The rest of the world went silent around them.

Will was blind in the bright police-style flashlight. He put his hands up. Abigail gasped and Hannibal was silent.

"Hands up. What people forget," said Ray, "is that I used to be police. I saw what you did to Marcel. You too, Annie, Dr. Larsen."

Will and Abigail held up their hands. Will had one foot on the boat and one on the dock, quite unsteady. He didn't want to hurt Ray. He didn't want anyone to die tonight.

Only one way out. "Help," Will mouthed soundlessly. "Please."

The light shifted focus from Will to Hannibal. "Put the gun down, Doc."

"You first," Hannibal said with a decided chill in his tone.

Abigail shrieked. Will looked at her and saw the rifle pressed against her head. Hannibal looked at him. "Only one way out," Hannibal said.

Ice spread through Will's veins. He shifted his weight and the boat rocked, warningly.

"Mr. Jones, not one more step, please," the Sergeant said behind them. "Dr. Larsen, put down the gun and I promise you will not be harmed."

"*He* promises," Ray said. Will couldn't see his face but his tone was ice and steel.

"You have my word of honor that everyone present will emerge unscathed if you lower the rifle," the Sergeant said.

"But he likes us scathed," Will said, and he launched himself, rocking the boat so that Ray stumbled and his light swung crazily on its wrist strap. He grabbed the rifle barrel away from Abigail's head. The rifle burned his hand when Hannibal fired and missed. He tossed the gun away along with some of his skin.

Hannibal bared his teeth and tackled him.

He rolled over and over with the impact, off the dock and into the water, barely catching a rope with his raw hands, but Hannibal was still on his body, eyes alternately blazing like fire and black as the void as the light swung over his face.

He broke Hannibal's finger as he bent his hand back from his shirt. Hannibal grabbed his hair and bit into his cheek.

Strong teeth tore flesh from bone. He breathed water as he recoiled. He spluttered between sea and air. Hannibal shoved his head underwater as he scrambled up Will's body and onto the dock.

He flailed. He could swim if he could just remember how, if his body would react instead of just shaking. He was drowning. The water was cold and hot and cold again. He stared up at the stars, the yawning splash of the Milky Way growing indistinct as the water deepened over his head.

Strong hands took his arm and hauled him up. He opened his mouth and found it full of water. He was a fish in air. He was drowning, his vision black.

The Sergeant bent him over and tipped his head down and he vomited water and blood. His cheek was hanging free, pain like lightning inside his face. He vomited once more.

The boat roared to life. Hannibal was gone. And Abigail?

"Dad! Daddy, Daddy, what did he do to you? Please no," Abigail said, kneeling beside him, holding him as the Sergeant eased him down onto the ground. "He hurt you again, please no, please, don't be dead, don't be dead, don't be dead."

"I'm ok," Will said, his voice thready, and Abigail clung to him and sobbed.

*

They took him down the coast to the nearest emergency room. He wouldn't let them put him under, though. He threw half-hearted punches and shook his head, splattering blood on clean tile, when they suggested it. So his face was sewn up under local anesthetic and mild sedation as Abigail held his hands in hers.

"I'm okay," she said softly to the surgeon. "I got used to the medical stuff when Doc cut off my ear."

The Sergeant stood very, very still by the door.

"It's crazy what you get used to, right? He cut Dad's chest over the winter, but it was--I mean, it wasn't bad. I just can't stand it when he really hurt him--when he beat him on his feet so we couldn't run away--" Her voice shook, and she pressed her forehead to Will's hands.

Will squeezed her hand. His face was paralyzed; he couldn't speak. He could barely see. The surgeon had to reattach his cheek in layers, first inside his mouth, then the muscle, then the skin. He wouldn't be pretty afterwards.

And against all odds, as Will lay in the hospital with his face bitten off, as Abigail's missing ear was exposed, their cover was still intact. He'd been admitted as Gilbert Jones. The police thought--Ray, pacing back and forth in the hall, thought--that they had uncovered a particularly vicious domestic abuser. Hannibal had gotten away cleanly, and once Will was sewn up, he and Abigail could vanish and join him.

He stroked Abigail's hair. Just a couple more hours--

"Miss Olesen," the Sergeant said. "Is Christian Larsen in fact Hannibal Lecter?"

Abigail froze. She met Will's eyes and he knew and she knew that she wasn't capable of lying her way through this. She looked at the Sergeant and shook uncontrollably.

Will moved, trying to grab her hands, making the surgeon squawk and hold him back. "He'll think we sold him out," Abigail said, her voice tiny. Genuine panic. "He'll think I told you. He'll, no, no, you can't--"

She grabbed a scalpel from the surgeon's tray and stared around her. Sarge held out his hand, alarmed, and the surgeon bolted back against the wall and hit a button. Ray threw open the door and he and Constable Jenny hovered in the door like sheepdogs.

"I don't want to know what he'll do to me," Abigail said with rising hysteria.

Will stood and took her in his arms. He swayed, hazy from sedation, but she turned toward him, her eyes streaming. She dropped the scalpel and wrapped her arms around him.

Blood drooled onto her hair from his half-sewn face. He met the Sergeant's eyes and nodded, sharply, once.

*

They ran his prints, and Abigail's, and knew who they were. They shipped him and Abigail to Montreal for treatment. The Sergeant and Ray followed.

Abigail was horrified to be in a big city, in an unsecured building, wearing her own name on a bracelet on her wrist. They took her out of Will's hospital room when her upset started interfering with his care.

The Sergeant sat beside his bed. "I will need to take your statement," he said.

Will gestured to his sewn up mouth. His cheek was too swollen to speak. The patch job would have to be revised. His eyelid sagged; the nerves and muscle were traumatized. He would have some awful scars.

"When you are able. Can I get you anything in the meantime? Can I contact anyone for you?"

Will shook his head. He groped at the side table and the Sergeant handed him pen and paper. NO FAMILY, he wrote. ONLY ABIGAIL.

There was a knock on the door. Will looked up and saw Alana Bloom. Alive. Vertical. Angry. Where she had been soft, she was hard now. She wore a circus-striped suit like armor.

She walked into the room leaning on a cane. She didn't even glance at the Sergeant. "I'm going to have your murder child thrown in prison," she said.

Will looked down at the paper and turned it around. "Pls," he managed through his torn mouth.

"Ma'am," the Sergeant said.

Alana looked at the Sergeant at last. "She pushed me out a second floor window. Don't believe her lies."

HIS LIES, Will wrote, and underlined it again and again until she looked at the message.

"You ran away with him," Alana said.

THOUGHT I COULD STOP HIM. LET HIM EAT MY LIVER, Will wrote.

"How romantic."

YOU ARE IN DANGER.

"I know. I'm not staying. I figure he is; he'll be lurking around, like usual, staring at you. What are *you*going to do, that's the question," she said.

Will laughed. He laughed until he choked on spit, and he shook his head, and he spread his arms to say: I have no idea.

"I can recommend a surgeon for the face if you last that long. Mason saw everyone. Mason was my brother in law," she said to the Sergeant. "He cut off his face and fed it to Will's dogs

after Hannibal drugged him. Don't believe Will's protestations of innocence."

"I personally saw Dr. Lecter bite Mr. Graham and try to drown him," the Sergeant said.

"But not kill him," Alana said.

"I was there to pull him from the water."

She shook her head. "Congratulations on the white knight, Will. Personally, I think I've found my closure. You can have them call my office regarding the surgeon." She threw her business card on the bed.

She left. The Sergeant watched her go. "A hard woman," he said.

SHE WAS LOVELY BEFORE SHE MET HANNIBAL, Will wrote.

*

Abigail was committed to the psych ward. She couldn't sleep, couldn't function with strangers, couldn't stop having inappropriate laughing and crying and screaming fits.

They let her visit him, though. "I keep wanting things to go back to normal, and then I realize I don't know what normal is," Abigail said. "Normal in Minnesota with my serial killer dad? Or normal in the sea house with my other serial killer dad? I try to--to picture it, and I just. I start screaming," she said, and drew in a shaky breath and curled into his side. "I promise I'm trying to stop."

YOU DON'T HAVE TO PROMISE ANYTHING TO ME, Will wrote. I'LL LEAVE IF IT'S EASIER.

She caught her breath as she read. "No! You're the only one who gets it!"

He embraced her to his side. "I'm so tired," she said.

He stroked her hair and nodded. He sat with her, in the still small space the two of them made, and closed his eyes and listened to her breathe.

"Will?"

He tried and failed to respond.

"Will!"

"Mr. Graham? Can you open your eyes? Can you squeeze my hand?"

"Gurney, now."

"Mr. Graham? You'll feel a pinch."

The shadows stirred around him. "Cypris and you Néreïds, bring my brother back to me unharmed: let him sail home safely: grant that every one of his heart’s desires all be

accomplished--once he makes amends for the present straying of his ways, returning to bring great gladness to his friends and ruin upon our enemies," the shadow hissed into his ears.

"Forgive me for my trespasses as I forgave those who trespassed against us," Will answered. The tentacles of the shadow gathered him into their ink-dark depths. He closed his eyes and floated.

"One short sleep past, we wake eternally and death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die," the shadows said.

"Perchance to dream; aye, there's the rub," Will said, staring into the void.

*

The Sergeant was in the visitor's chair when Will fully woke up, hat on the table beside him, sharing a venison sandwich with Ray.

Will drifted, enjoying the smell of the fresh bread, the pickle, the smoked meat, the easy silence. He wondered how old the two men were. They were weather-beaten and vital in the way of people who spent a lot of time on the land. They'd clearly been together for a very long time. Ray seemed to be retired, but neither of them seemed to be of retirement age. Mid-sixties? Younger?

"Hey, Gil. Wanna pickle?" Ray asked him.

"Nn," Will mumbled. He opened his eyes.

His face hurt. His neck hurt. His chest hurt.

"Dr. Lecter has been spotted in Vancouver, Mr. Graham," the Sergeant said. "Well away from here."

"Fake. He's...smoke," Will mumbled. His face ached in a distant manner.

"He seemed pretty corporeal when I kicked him in the head," Ray said.

"You don't understand…"

The Sergeant leaned over the bed. His face was heartbreakingly kind. "No, I don't understand how humans can do such things to one other. I never shall. I am here in my official capacity, but once my duties are completed, I hope that we can be friends. You need friends, Mr. Graham; we all do, but you, I think, more than most."

"No." He swallowed hard. "No. Get him out of here. Ray…get him out, or you'll die. He's still watching...you'll die, both of you. You'll be killed. Get him out." Every word clawed at his mouth but he didn't care. Ray was the suspicious one, the one who scouted around the back, the one who covered their six. He knew he couldn't persuade the Sergeant, but he thought he could persuade Ray.

"He's harder to kill than he looks," Ray said.

Will pressed his hand to his face to stop the throbbing. "He'll cut out his heart and eat it in front of you," Will said. "He'll do something even worse to you. He's not a man." He closed his eyes. His face was on fire and he was exhausted. "He's not a man. He's the Devil."

"I got Jesus," Ray said.

The darkness closed over his head.

*

The nurses explained to him, once he woke up again, that an infection had formed in the torn flesh of his face, but that fortunately, the plastic surgeon had arrived for his revision surgery just in time to open him up and debride the wound and make the repairs. He'd been in surgery for eleven hours but he would look much better once the swelling went down.

His body was treated like a crime scene. He was taken in for scans to document the healed scars on his liver. His feet were examined and the lingering marks documented. Picture after picture was taken of Hannibal's initial carved into his chest. There was no chance, he thought resignedly, of Freddie Lounds not getting her hands on all this.

He heard a nurse say "Stockholm syndrome" to another in the hall. "It's captor bonding!" he yelled back. After that, the hall was silent. He heard a laugh from the corner of the room.

"What a terror of a teacher you are, Will," Hannibal said.

Will looked up and watched Hannibal walk around the bed.

Hannibal added something to Will's IV. "I knew you were there," Will said, his eyelids sagging. "I could smell you."

"Your scent is sadly masked." Hannibal put his palm on Will's forehead and moved his head from side to side. "Your wounds need further revision, I'm afraid. But I can take care of that. I have a new house in mind already."

"Long 's I can fish," Will whispered, slipping into unconsciousness.

The Bone Arena, Winter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He sat across from a shadow.

"*Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona, mi prese del costui piacer sì forte, che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona. Amor condusse noi ad una moret*," the shadow said.

Love, which absolves no loved one from loving, seized me so strongly with delight in him, that, as you see, it does not leave me even now. Love brought us to one death.

"Are you dead or are you death?" Will asked.

The shadow leaned forward. Its eyes were white as bone. "*Pianger di doglia e sospirar d' angoscia mi strugge 'l core ovunque sol mi trovo.*"

Through mournful sighing and despairful tears my lonely heart doth sicken unto death.

"I'm not good company," Will said.

"*E quando mi domandavano 'Per cui t'ha così distrutto questo Amore?', ed io sorridendo li guardava, e nulla dicea loro*," the shadow said.

And when people would ask: "Who is the person for whom you are so destroyed by Love?" I would look at them and smile and say nothing.

"I'm not particularly good in bed," Will said.

"*Partissi de la sua bella persona piene di grazia l' anima gentile, ed essi gloriosa in loco degno.*"

Her gentle soul hath doffed the lovely veil of flesh which it so wondrously did wear, and dwells all-glorious in appointed place.

"And I'll eat you," Will said. "I have a cultivated taste for flesh."

The shadow stood tall and spread its vast tentacles. "*GIUSTIZIA MOSSE IL MIO ALTO FATTORE; FECEMI LA DIVINA PODESTATE, LA SOMMA SAPÏENZA E 'L PRIMO AMORE. DINANZI A ME NON FUOR COSE CREATE SE NON ETTERNE, E IO ETTERNO DURO. LASCIATE OGNE SPERANZA, VOI CH'INTRATE.*"

JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH. DIVINE POWER MADE ME, WISDOM SUPREME, AND PRIMAL LOVE. BEFORE ME NOTHING WAS BUT THINGS ETERNAL, AND ETERNAL I ENDURE. ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.

Will looked up at the shadow. He stood and opened his stomach, showing the yawning, devouring void within. The shadow stretched out its tentacle and was caught by the void.

"Con sei occhi piangëa, e per tre menti gocciava 'l pianto e sanguinosa bava. Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla, sì che tre ne facea così dolenti," the shadow said as Will absorbed it, sucked it into himself, grinding it into nothingness inch after inch. It was a struggle. The shadow fought back wildly. As he devoured the shadow, the shadow became part of him, until there was no distinguishing shadow and light.

Out of six eyes he wept and his three chins dripped tears and drooled blood-red saliva. With his teeth, just like a hackle pounding flax, he champed a sinner in each mouth, tormenting three at once.

"I don't believe in sin," Will said, and he opened his eyes.

*

He opened his eyes and Hannibal was soothing him, offering him soup and savory things on toast, assuring him it was all a nightmare, that everything was fine.

The window was open and he could feel cold air, hear wind on water, hear seals barking. He had no conception of where they were.

"You had an incident," Hannibal said. "You were very ill. You're having trouble forming new memories. I have made you a reminder." He tapped the creamy handwritten page on the rosewood tray in front of Will.

Abigail is safe.

I love you.

If you need to move I will help you.

The dog's name is Pepper.

"Pepper?" Will said.

Hannibal smiled. "Always the first thing you ask. One moment." He stood and left the bedroom.

Will found his knitting in its usual place beside the bed, but when he held up his project, he found a weird tube with multiple irregular holes like a sweater-vest for an amoeba. He set it down and nibbled at the savory toast; it seemed familiar, though he couldn't place it. He looked at his hands, touched himself, and discovered almost absently that his hair and beard were cropped close, that his face was heavily scarred, and that he had no legs.

He folded back the blanket and looked at his stumps. He was wearing pajamas hemmed to mid-thigh, the length of his legs. The amputations were still healing. He had no prosthesis calluses but also no stitches. He felt like he had expected this, like he had seen it before. He must have seen it before. He looked at the note.

He heard dog feet on a wooden floor and looked up. Hannibal returned with a small mutt, white with a brown head, ears perked and plumed tail wagging. She sat politely beside the bed.

"Sit up," Hannibal said, and Pepper sat up with front paws folded. "On the bed," and Pepper leaped up to the bed and snuggled up to Will's side.

"You are the ruination of my standards," Hannibal said. "But her feet are as clean as I can make them, and I will change the sheets before we sleep."

Will stroked her head. "Pepper?" he said. Her ears perked under his hand. "Good girl."

"You seem different today. Are you remembering?" Hannibal said.

"Maybe? This feels familiar and unfamiliar at the same time," Will said.

"Good."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Some time." Hannibal kissed Will's forehead. "But recall point two: I love you. I will always be here."

Chapter End Notes

The poetry is, of course, Dante. Most of the translations are from here: http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/

Unfortunately I did not keep track of the exact poem each line is from. I'm sure you'll recognize Inferno. Some is from Vita Nuovo and some from his minor poems.

Озеро Байкал, Spring

The new house was beside a huge, clear lake, perched on a small hill at the foot of a range of mountains. It was very cold. The lake was frozen solid. It was the cusp of spring, he thought, just about to thaw.

When he saw Abigail for the first time in this new place, his mind...cleared.

He leaned up and she bent over so he could kiss her pale cheek. "What's your horse's name?" The horse was small, winter-fuzzy, big-headed. It rolled its eye and shook its bridle at him.

"I didn't name her. I figure she has her own name in Horse," Abigail said. She looked good, if you ignored the shaking hands and shaking voice.

"I'm okay," he said softly.

"No you're not."

"I am. I really am. There are things that are important and things that aren't important. I'm learning that the circle of the former is is very, very small," Will said. "I will do anything to keep you safe."

"Dad…"

He opened his arms and she folded into his lap. He hugged her tight. He retained this memory, the weight of her body on his sore legs, the smell of cold spring air, the squabbling of eagles overhead.

"You're finally back," she said.

*

He started sleeping apart from Hannibal a few days after he woke up. Hannibal let him wheel back and forth to the spare room, moving his clothes, without comment.

The lake house was more modern than the sea house. Beneath the house was a wine and cold meat cellar, not unlike Hannibal's Baltimore house. (He did recognize the taste of his own flesh. One leg had been turned into links of various sausage, the other thigh preserved as ham. Hannibal kept his snail garden in a small humid cellar room on the remains of Will's feet. His calves were frozen cutlets wrapped in paper in the freezer.) He had nothing but time to eat and rest and regain strength in his arms and hands. They were isolated in a different way here. There were people all around them: boats on the lake, horses and vehicles in the hills, sometimes helicopters and planes overhead, but nobody ever approached the house. More passers-by than the sea house, but no friends, and no nosy police.

In time, he relearned his body. His stomach (sewn up with the letter Het), his legs (the letters Nun and Bet stitched over the stumps), his face (the letter Lemda deeply incised beside his

mouth).

(He couldn't find the letter Eyn, a hollow circle. He wondered if it would be forehead, arm, eye, or an exit wound in Abigail.)

He lived in the moment. Pepper followed him adoringly, making him smile at odd intervals with her happy little face. She came out to the dock with him and sat quietly as he knitted.

He spoke to Hannibal civilly. He let his hair and beard grow. He unraveled the weird knitting project and made himself padded mitts to cushion his hands on the wheels of his chair.

He learned about Horse from Abigail. Horse was a nimble little mountain pony and could carry Abigail off the flat and right up into the deer trails. "And she knows where home is. I got lost and she kept tugging in one direction and she took me right home to dinner. This was when you were still--um. You wouldn't remember."

"I was still drugged?" Will suggested.

Abigail nodded. "I don't know what he was trying to do. He wouldn't let me see you all winter," she said, and her voice broke.

Will knew, of course. He'd spent his career knowing what killers wanted. "He's gotten attached. He can't stand to lose us," he said.

Abigail looked at his legs. "I figured that much out," she whispered.

"He tried to change me into someone who wouldn't mind his thirst for blood, but it didn't work, so he gave up and let me stay myself; he just made sure that I would stay where he put me," Will said. "It's not the worst compromise. I'm happy here."

Abigail exhaled. She twisted Horse's mane in her fingers. "Really?"

"I don't have to talk to people and I can go fishing every day. It's the only thing I asked him for in a house," Will said, and he smiled at her. It was a beautiful day.

*

As the months wore on, the days became warm while the night stayed cold. The living room was dominated by a fireplace, just as in the sea house, but they weren't dependent on it in the same way. They had a furnace as well. Will preferred the sea house, but he didn't say so. He sat in his chair by the fire and drank whiskey and read through the bookshelves (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; Lord of the Rings; Chilton's book Hannibal the Cannibal).

During the day he fished and tied flies and knitted, depending on the weather. He would experiment with jam once the berries ripened on the hills; he could send Abigail out to pick them. He trained Pepper to fetch balls of yarn without worrying them.

It was a glorious day, bright and clear as a bell. He tried out a new fly and it worked beautifully. He brought his catch into the kitchen: a large golden fish with ink-like speckles that he knew from experience tasted like lobster. "This is a burbot," he said to Hannibal. "I finally figured out what fly to use."

Hannibal smiled at him sideways. He was preparing something complicated, red meat and green herbs. "Excellent eating, but not tonight. Can you freeze it for me?"

"Sure. Pass me a knife and I'll gut it."

Hannibal, slowly, deliberately, slid a razor-sharp knife from the block and laid it on the counter beside the fish. He watched as Will picked up the knife.

Will slit the burbot open. "Love absolves no loved one from loving," he said.

Hannibal cocked his head. "Dante."

"If someone loves you, you have to love them back, you have no choice. That's what the line means, right? The fact of being loved, it changes you," Will said.

He split the fish into two halves and set aside the head and guts. Hannibal used those things for stock, compost, something like that. He turned to Hannibal and lightly tapped the point of his knife against Hannibal's stomach. Fish blood stained a faint pink circle into his shirt. "I know you love me," Will said. "I've always known that. So I have no choice but to love you," he said, and he tapped the knife again.

Hannibal moved slightly closer, and the knife slid up his fine cotton shirt for an inch before catching in the weave. The weave was tight and glossy, but the knife was very sharp. "It could sour into hate. The emotions are very similar."

"I still don't hate you, though," Will said, and Hannibal took the knife from his hand and tossed it into the sink, and he swooped down and kissed Will hard, open-mouthed, and he stroked his tongue into Will's mouth and Will grabbed his shoulders and hauled himself out of his chair.

They had sex in the sunlight on the floor of the kitchen. Will's hands marked Hannibal's thighs with blood. He tore the buttons and cuffs of Hannibal's shirt. He held Hannibal's fingers between his teeth, smelling pungent herbs, as Hannibal mouthed his stomach and groin. Hannibal cupped Will's ass and Will clenched the stumps of his thighs around Hannibal's head. He held him close. He loved him.

Hannibal wiped his mouth, when they were done, and sat against the cupboard door and pulled Will into the V of his legs. "Hey," Will said. "I'm smaller but I'm not portable."

"It was rude. I apologize. I meant for you to see what I see," Hannibal said. He pointed.

An eagle was sitting in the larch near the house. "Oh," Will said. She was enormous, her wings half-mantled as she preened herself with darting strokes. She shone gold and bronze in the afternoon sun.

Abruptly she froze and stared into the distance. Her talons clenched on the branch. Hannibal held his breath, tensing his hands against Will's stomach.

She dropped like a rock. She rose again with a young brown hare in her talons. It kicked wildly, desperate for life.

The eagle bit at the hare's skull and the hare jerked away, kicking with long legs and dull claws. It fell from her talons and she pursued it.

Will listened but didn't hear the death scream of the hare. Hannibal exhaled against his skull once the eagle did not return. "Did she catch the hare?" Will asked.

"No. But it will still die. It cannot survive such handling."

"The hare has no choice but to die at the hands of the eagle," Will said, leaning back into Hannibal's arms. He relaxed and closed his eyes.

They made dinner together. Will cranked out fresh pasta. Hannibal brushed his fingers along Will's forearm, tracing the hard muscle as Will ran the dough through the machine for the final time.

Abigail came in after the pasta was finished and Will and Hannibal were still sitting together, Hannibal fondling Will's hand. "It's going to dry out," she said, rescuing the strands. Her forehead was creased as she moistened the pasta lightly in her hands and placed it in a covered wooden bowl.

Hannibal lifted Will's hand to his mouth and kissed the back. "Do not fret, Abigail. All is well."

*

Озеро Байкал, Summer

Hannibal drove into town and brought home Chilton's new book. The title was *DINNER FOR THREE*. "Do I have to?" Will said, wrinkling his nose.

"I thought you might find it amusing. I read the first chapter. He has some particularly clumsy inferences about our relationship. Apparently I am entranced by your fey, feminine anima."

Will looked down at his plaid shirt, overalls with a disassembled reel in the chest pocket, long beard coursing down his neck. He raised his eyebrows.

"While I do find you lovely, I do find you more...what is the term. An otter?"

"I've gone full mountain man and you know it," Will said. He took the book and wheeled back to his desk to finish fixing the reel. "Did you get the wine you wanted?"

"No. And I resisted the urge to order it. I did find cooking wine and an acceptable whiskey for you."

"Good fugitive. Here, have a biscuit," Will said. Pepper perked up her ears. Will, realizing his error, gave her a treat and Hannibal the binoculars. "Up the hill that looks like a knee, 45 degrees west of the bush shaped like a cabbage," Will told him. He watched as Hannibal found the eagle's nest in the tall, lightning-split pine.

He saw the wistful look on Hannibal's face as he lowered the binoculars. "The nest is fresh and eagles tend to return year on year. I looked inside and found the fresh remains of eggs," Will said.

Hannibal looked at him sharply. "How?"

"The drone," Will said. "You use it to spy on the pleasure boats, I use it to look in eagle nests. Do you think you can climb that tree?"

"There are no branches, but I could fasten a line...yes. Will." Hannibal's eyes were shining, giddy.

"So next year we're stealing an egg for Abigail, and we'll teach our young Diana to hunt," Will said.

In bed that night he read choice passages aloud, mocking Chilton together with Hannibal as they sipped the acceptable whiskey. He had returned to Hannibal's bed after that afternoon on the kitchen floor. "What a small man he is," Hannibal said.

"And a terrible psychologist. When he was trying to see into my head it was like surgery with a plastic spoon. Oh, God, the next chapter is about our fathers. I had a good father. He cared about me. He fed and clothed me as best he could on minimum wage."

"I had a good father, loving, who was killed by Russian brigands. What does Chilton say?"

"He says...this first part is all about me. 'Graham's affinity for stray dogs began in his childhood in New Orleans.' I'm from Lafayette, not NOLA. Apparently my father hit me and that's why I was in foster care. Actually, the police raided the house by mistake, and put me in social services because I wouldn't talk to them. Social services gave me back once Dad figured out where I was and claimed me. Chilton is an a asshole. He says about you...both that you were raised in an orphanage and that you were raised by your uncle, bad proofreading."

"I was raised in an orphanage and subsequently adopted by my uncle. I went to him at sixteen and he died shortly after."

"Huh. Oh, this is good; he says you were in love with your aunt."

"I was; indeed I remain in love with my aunt." Hannibal fed Will an olive and met his eyes. "Are you jealous?"

Will considered. "No. When you do feel things, you feel them strongly, and you never let go. So anyone you once loved, you would always love."

Hannibal's eyes sparkled. "You know me so well."

"Inside and out," Will said. He closed the book and set it by the bed, then turned his back to Hannibal, fitting his back to Hannibal's chest and resting his head against Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal's arms slid around him. He pressed his nose into Will's throat. "Whose murder are you planning currently?" Will asked.

Hannibal kissed his jaw. "Jack's. I can't decide what I want from him. Liver, perhaps, the organ that killed his wife."

"I thought she died of lung cancer?"

"Grown from a liver cell. The punishment of Prometheus, for stealing fire from the gods, was to have his liver torn out endlessly. Jack stole fire from man and gave you to me. We could tear out his liver together, day after day."

"I thought that was our special moment. Now I *am* jealous," Will said. He touched Hannibal's initial on his stomach. Hannibal's fingers followed, brushing up and down the thick scar.

Hannibal kissed his jaw again. His low, strong heartbeat thumped against Will's spine. "Perhaps, then, his tongue."

"It's hard to know which of his trespasses to punish," Will mused.

"His brain, for its narrowness? His eyes, for seeing half the truth? His heart, for not loving you more. And you?"

"Chilton. He profiles Abigail later in the book."

Hannibal grew very still. "Chilton. Yes."

"For Jack, you would use me as bait, but if Chilton saw me, he would just run away. Honestly, I surprised he had the guts to write these books." He twisted his mouth into half a smile. "Especially after Abel Gideon lightened his intestinal load."

"I detect certain turns of phrase that point to the influence of Freddie Lounds. I think they have formed an alliance," Hannibal said.

"Lounds. She has enough guts for two. So she's using him as cover and he just thinks she's collaborating because he's amazing."

"Indeed," Hannibal said.

"What a fool," Will said. A picture began to form in his mind. "You know the Rider-Waite tarot cards? The Fool?"

"The Fool, representing the innocent, stepping off the cliff while looking at the clouds; a small dog at his feet barks to warn him." Hannibal smiled. "I do see."

"I'll be the dog. You be the hand of Fate," Will said.

*

He hadn't been entirely serious, but then Hannibal presented him with a drawing and Chilton's current location, and then he read Chilton's chapters on Abigail.

He was growing stronger, much stronger. He could muscle his wheelchair through the grass to throw sticks for Pepper and carrots for Horse. He'd long replaced the old wheelchair with a smaller, sleeker one designed for him to operate, not for someone else to push. It made quite a difference.

"It smells like snow," he told Hannibal on his return to the house. "Feet," he said to Pepper, and Pepper held her feet up in turn to be wiped down.

"I agree. I suppose we will be snowed in again, but this time I will be better prepared."

"Enough flour?"

"A great deal of flour."

*

After the first few snow flurries, Will built a sled with wheel-locks for his chair and asked Abigail to come sledding with him.

"You're crazy," she said.

"Of course I am."

"And you're going to break your neck."

"It's barely a slope," Will said. "Look, down here, away from the lake and into the flood plain. It's so flat we could go a half a mile."

Her forehead creased as she looked down the slope. She was developing a permanent line there.

"And I double dog dare you," Will said, and Abigail laughed in surprise.

She sat in front of his chair on the sled. "You could just sit on a regular sled," she said. "You're going to fall off the chair, I'm serious."

"I don't want to walk home on my hands in the snow."

"I can pull you!"

"...That's a good point," he said, and he left the chair at the top of the hill, and pushed them off, and for all that it was a gentle slope, it was thrilling to hurtle through the air with her. The chilly air stung his face and pulled at his hair and ears. Abigail yelled happily as they skidded onto the lake, slowing gradually, coming to a rest on the flat smooth snow-dusted plain.

She beamed at him and he grinned back. He leaned back on his hands and breathed the icy air. Abigail tipped her head back as well and watched the eagles wheeling overhead.

*

After dinner--snails fed on foraged lingonberry, delicious--they opened a second bottle of wine and discussed Chilton.

"He is still in Baltimore," Hannibal said. "He has a personal security team, of course." He smirked.

"He wouldn't be expecting me," Abigail said. "I could show up like a ghost. Ooh, could I wear white makeup?"

"No," Hannibal said with a frown on his eyebrows.

"Tacky, baby girl," Will said.

"Aw."

Chilton had moved to a private gated community with additional security, so that was the first step; Hannibal sketched out a diagram of how to circumvent both sets of security. "Should it be in his house? Wouldn't it be easier to snatch and grab?" Will said.

"He has attacked us in the most intimate ways," Hannibal said softly. "Should we not return the favor? Remove his safe places, lay bare his mind?"

Will swallowed. He closed his eyes. "His bedroom," he said, and he could see it, Chilton in pajamas, tucking himself into bed. "While he's asleep. He feels safe and then we converge. Give him a moment of horror, and let it sustain, like a long note on a clarinet. Put a hook through his lying tongue. Put a razor wire around his clumsy hands. Put a sword at the foot of his bed, and let him choose. Stand on his bed, one foot in the air, the Fool. I'll hold his belt; Hannibal holds the wire. Abigail tells him the options, forward or back. The voice of Fate. Fall off the cliff or return to safety minus the parts he no longer deserves to wield. This is my design," he said, and he opened his eyes.

Hannibal's eyes were shining. He was delighted. Abigail had her hands over his mouth, but she was nodding her head. Will's heart was pounding in his throat. He felt ill.

This was not Hannibal's design. This was his.

*

Озеро Байкал, Fall

Hannibal left for the city to make travel arrangements, taking Abigail with him. It would be a long drive, he said. Will stayed home, as always. He wasn't even sure what their cover story was.

He wheeled out onto the dock and peered into the water. The lake was still liquid, but it felt like ice fishing season soon. He returned to the house and looked through the shed. Among all this gear--drones and fishing poles and climbing lines and survival gear--there had to be an ice auger, he thought, and indeed he found one misplaced in the chest of woodworking equipment.

He started to sharpen it, running a stone along the top of the blade. Smaller fish for bait, he thought. Lure the big fish in with the dance of the smaller prey, like luring Chilton in by giving him a glimpse of Abigail, neither the fish nor the slimy little man knowing that they were tricked by a larger predator. He hated Chilton and his words and his thoughts. Will just wanted to fish. He resented the intrusion of the outside world. Like the knocking--

The knocking. It wasn't a woodpecker or any natural thing. Some human was knocking at his door. He froze, forgetting what to do.

He was supposed to answer the door, he recalled. When someone knocked at the door, you answered. Will swallowed hard and wheeled to the front door.

He opened it.

"Did you think we would abandon you?" Ray said. The Sergeant stood beside him, holding his hat in his hands.

Will wheeled backwards. His heart pounded, thundering in his ears. "You need to leave, now. You need to get out of here."

"Gil. We saw him leave, it's safe," Ray said. He held out his hand, and the Sergeant stepped forward into the doorway, and Hannibal strode soundlessly over the new-fallen snow from their car.

Will shot them both in the eye (Ray in the left eye, the Sergeant in the right eye, so close together, instantly dead as the needle pierced their brains) with a two-shot crossbow he'd built from knitting needles and a spring.

He covered his eyes with a shaking hand. His mind was blank and cold. He heard nothing, smelled nothing, couldn't breathe, only felt the slight kick of someone's boot on the floor.

Just a reflex in a quieting brain. His aim was true. He had nothing but time to practice with his needles. He had nothing but time to fill. He couldn't breathe.

"The quality of mercy is not strained," Hannibal said. Will gasped, cold air like cold water in his throat. "It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. Mercy is above this sceptered sway. It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings. It is an attribute to God himself."

Will jerked then froze as Hannibal touched his cheek. Hannibal leaned in and kissed Will, deeply and gently, and pulled back to look into his eyes and stroke his bearded cheeks. "I showed you the Antichrist and you showed me God. You are endlessly surprising, Will."

He took a deep breath, another. He steadied his hands and heart. "Where is Abigail?"

"In the car," Hannibal said. "We will make the trip to Irkutsk tomorrow."

"Thank you," Will said, and he stabbed Hannibal in the throat with his ice auger.

The newly sharpened blade of the auger grated against bone. He pulled Hannibal close and warmed up in the gouts of blood. He let Hannibal clutch at Will's throat with weakening hands, letting his knee crush the stump of Will's thigh. It didn't matter. He looked into his wide brown eyes and watched the blood bubble from his mouth.

"I'm a killer but not a murderer, not like you, not in my heart," Will said softly. Lovingly.

Hannibal grew paler, unable to speak through the drowning blood.

"I saw myself plan death over and over and over, but it was never my own desire. Not even now. I didn't want you to die," Will said. It felt like the blood was growing cold around them, like ice water. He swallowed and felt ice in his throat.

"Daddy," Abigail said, her voice terrible. Will looked at her and his eyes swam with tears.

"You're free," Will said to her. "You're free." But as he spoke, Hannibal's hand went limp on the scalpel in his artery, and the blade twisted, cutting a neat circle. The blade slipped free and Will fell back in his chair. His heart, obeying its simple mandate, propelled bright blood in a parabolic arc.

Auger and scalpel tumbled to the floor as Abigail pressed her hands to his throat. She tried to stop his bleeding, but there wasn't anything she could do. That was okay. She was free. She was fed, and clothed, and rich, given all the unmarked currency in various hidey-holes throughout the house. She had Horse and the car and languages. She could hunt and fish. She wasn't wanted for any crimes. She was capable of real love.

He smiled as she said his name, over and over, her hands hot as fire. He hoped she ate the rest of the andouille made from his legs. "To make a gumbo, start with a dark roux, dark as molasses," he said, or maybe just thought. Still, he felt like she heard him.

*

END.

End Notes

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